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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/MUSLIM OUTREACH: AMSTERDAM MOSQUE HOSTS
DUTCH-MOROCCAN WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Nearly 300 Dutch-Moroccan women crowded a hall at Amsterdam's Al Kabir Mosque on February 19 to hear spokeswomen from four political parties in advance of March 7 local elections. The meeting was indicative of growing minority interest in the upcoming polls. Long-term residents, not just citizens, are eligible to vote, giving immigrant communities a larger voice than they have in national elections. Audience comments focused on the Danish cartoon controversy and alleged discrimination against Muslim job applicants. Though the atmosphere was cordial, a sense of frustration and growing impatience was evident on both sides. End Summary.

DUTCH-MOROCCAN WOMEN SPEAK OUT

¶2. (SBU) An all-female, standing-room-only crowd gathered on a recent Sunday at Amsterdam's largest Moroccan mosque for a four-hour program of prayer, youth skits and political debate. CG attended the conference as an observer, having been invited by local Dutch-Muslim contacts. Four parties (PvdA, VVD, GL and Amsterdam Anders) sent representatives, several of whom were Dutch-Moroccans. Asked for a show of hands, about 60 percent of those present indicated they plan to vote in the March 7 municipal elections. Party representatives described recent and planned initiatives intended to benefit minority constituencies, but audience questions and comments were passionate and critical. Most of those who spoke were younger than 30. Among the comments:
--Political party representatives visit the neighborhood only during election campaigns.
--Social services are difficult to access, especially for middle-aged or older women who do not speak Dutch. Social service workers are often hostile, uninterested or overly intrusive.
--Qualified, Dutch-educated Muslim women seek employment in vain, especially if they wear headscarves. Employers pretend jobs have been filled, or accept the application but never contact the applicant.
--Dutch politicians, including those who are Muslim, have failed to take a firm stand against the Danish cartoons or to articulate why their publication was insulting to Muslims. This comment prompted an equally heated response from another young woman, who said it is up to Muslim citizens, not elected representatives, to voice their displeasure with the cartoons, and that they should do so legally and with dignity.

¶3. (SBU) Party representatives privately said they were not surprised that younger members of the audience were so concerned about the Danish cartoons, but they were clearly disappointed that the progress they cited on housing, education, and job training got little traction with the most vocal members of this

audience. One young Muslim woman said city government was simply "doing its job" by providing these services, and should not expect immigrants to vote for a particular party because of its record in these areas.

THE QUESTION OF HEADSCARVES

14. (SBU) Women from the Mosque were conservatively dressed, most in long robes and nearly all in headscarves. There was general agreement that headscarves are more popular among Dutch Muslim women now than they were five years ago -- and that this is especially true for young women. One bareheaded young woman who works for the city government said that girls want to "show they are Muslims" in response to the "all negative" image of Muslims in the Dutch press and on TV. To challenge that perception, and to help themselves develop a more positive self-image, some decide to dress conservatively and to spend more time at the Mosque and studying Islam.

15. (SBU) Without exception, the young women at the CG's table -- all in their 20's, Dutch-born and with some post-high school education-- insisted that Dutch employers will not hire applicants for office jobs if they wear headscarves. They said this made them all the more determined to wear a headscarf while continuing to pursue jobs commensurate with their educations. Their personal experiences with what they termed discrimination also seemed to make them more sympathetic to the argument that the Danish cartoons were published as a deliberate insult to Muslims.

16. (SBU) Although not a member of the official program, the CG spoke individually with many of the women. Several -- including some of the non-Muslim political representatives -- asked about the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. They accepted the answer that abuse of prisoners is a crime under U.S. law and that the American people were shocked

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by the evidence of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, but there was general agreement with a young woman who said the punishment for these crimes had been meted out unfairly because low-level staff went to jail and responsible senior officers did not.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) Comment. The mood at the event was not unfriendly, and the women of the Mosque were gracious and welcoming. Nevertheless there was no missing the fact that the Muslims and non-Muslims in the room each felt the other was not really listening to what they had to say. Astonishingly, when lunch was served at the end of the meeting, the political representatives sat down together at a table in the corner instead of distributing themselves around the room to continue a dialogue with their audience. Asked for her thoughts following the event, a Dutch police officer who had observed quietly from the sidelines dismissed the Muslim women's complaints out of hand. They like to think themselves victims, she said; anyone can find a job if they really try. End Comment.
BOND